© Clay Geerdes, Box 7081, Berkeley, Ca 94707. Logo by Jim Siergey. All Rights Reserved. Artwork herein © the artists concerned. Used for promotional purposes only. #86.

I got a phone call from this writer who said he was doing a piece on underground comix in relation to the current show in progress at the San Francisco Museum of Cartoon Art. He wanted to talk to me about the early days of underground comix and more or less pick my brain for stuff to use in his article. I said fine and when he called back I spent about half an hour answering his questions. His article came out with some of my answers quoted and others written into the text as though they were his own insights. he got the rest of the information from the program book.

One of his questions was whether or not I thought underground comix had made any significant contribution to popular culture. Well, I have never considered the concept of popular culture anything but an academic scam, basically, an excuse used by various English teachers trapped in the publish or perish circuit to rationalize writing about football, bubble gum cards, hula hoops and comic books. This writing then appears in clones of stodgy tomes like HUDSON REVIEW or AMERICAN LITERATURE. With this in mind, I said the contribution of ug comix to popular culture was trivial. Naturally, this appeared in the writer's article, structured like an insult to those artists who drew for various underground comix.

This pissed me off. Have I done this newsletter for 17 years in order to dump on the comix it has routinely promoted? Of course not. As J. D. Salinger said, *people never give anybody your message.* Outsiders never get it straight and they do nothing but spread ill will with the type of phony conflicts they stage to "spice" up their poorly researched drivel.

Your average YUP could care less who was or wasn't in ZAP COMIX and he sure as Perrier with a twist of lemon isn't going to go back and read 13 issues to find out. The only people who care about this lore are the cartoonists and their collector groupies and a handful of historians like myself who have kept track of who what where when and why for god knows what strange reason. It isn't money; that's certain. The last articles I did for another comix-oriented pub netted me 0. I even paid the postage.

When the local adzines do take a look at comix, they get out all the old clichés and seldom do a lick of research--*this in an area that has a dozen or more comic stores, all of them staffed by people who know comic books and have the reference books right there on their shelves.* Reporters don't bother to check the facts, because they don't respect the medium. They would never have a *who gives a shit?* attitide for a subject they respected. Well, this type of article is always insulting to the comics community in general and to the artists in particular.

A writer did a front page piece for a San Francisco hypezine on the comix show at the Cartoon Art Museum, and lo and behold I learned that Bill Griffith was a longtime contributor to ZAP COMIX! I'll bet that's news to a lot of people.

In the early seventies when there was still an underground community, none of the cartoonists would have considered writing or publishing anything in the EXAMINER; as a matter of fact, there were straight cartoonists who envied the freedom of the underground and dropped out to do their own strips. Underground newspapers and the comix that appeared in them were anti-establishment and certainly anti anything that establishment promoted as culture. The cartoonists in the collectives were saying Fuck popular culture and smash the state! The idea that an underground cartoonist would ever want to appear on the same page with shit like Garfield is still alien to most. But there were academic folks who wanted in on the action. Drop out on weekends. Take some acid. Hide the old Jag in the hills above Haight Street, dress down and cruise the I-Thou Coffeehouse or the Drogstore Cafe. Maybe get it on with one of those teenaged hippy girls in the bushes in Golden Gate Park. Free everything. Acid, love, music. Then write about it all later elevating it all to some crapola like the greening of America or the Decline and Fall of the Imperialism State. Sneak those hippies into the quarterlies as subcultural drop-outs and visionaries, as the New Indians. What a lot of dogshit. Pop culture. Underground comix were about unpopular culture if they had anything to do with culture. I remember the way Roger Brand used to go on about how much he hated what he considered "messagy comix."

You, dear reader, have to understand that the world of underground comix was not a unified one where everyone was tripping and jamming and all were one big happy family. There were numerous little cliques and factions just as there are now and there was a lot of jealousy and backbiting and a lot of hypocrisy. In reality, a lot of individualistic and often highly egocentric cartoonists were getting high and doing what they enjoyed doing, comic book stories. Now these stories, as most of you know since you have read them, are radically different. There is no one theme; there are hundreds.

So let's jump back to the question about the comix having some effect on popular culture, whatever the hell that is. Have movies and television been affected by underground comix in any way? Hey, isn't it really the other way around? Didn't underground comix parody the movies as MAD had been doing for quite some time before ZAP? What about something like Saturday Night Live? Underground Comix have anything to do with that? If you argue yes, you have your work cut out for you. Did John Belushi read the comix? In GOING TOO FAR, Tony Hendra went into detail about the influence of Harvey Kurtzman and MAD on SNL, but he also outlined the careers of people like Mort Sahl and Shelley Berman and Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor, all of whom had a more immediate effect on television humor than anything in the comix. I know Michael McClure was directly influenced by ZAP because he based some of the characters in GORF AND THE BLIND DYKE on those of Crumb and Wilson. GORF was done by the Magic Theater of Berkeley [later of San Francisco]. Question is, *is that popular culture or just culture?* I don't know. You decide. To me, Popular culture connotes stuff like hula hoops and skateboards and McDonald's mugs and the Super Bowl, things huge masses of people are into. Underground comix and little theater just do not qualify. I'll have to go with my definition of these as unpopular culture.

I think the contribution of the comix to the Super Bowl is trivial, but I could be wrong; hey, Charlie Brown's 40th birthday was celebrated during the half in New Orleans last Sunday [though he's actually 41, the first strip having appeared in TIP TOP COMICS in 1949]! We may see the day when Angelfood McSpade and Ruby the Dyke and Mr. Natural all have an orgy midfield when the 49ers win their 5th or 6th.

The kind of influence underground comix had came from the form more than the content. Crumb proved you could publish your own comic and the Eastern monopolies soon found competition springing up in the Bay Area and the Midwest. The content had little or no influence. The state was not smashed, the "Hip" community was driven out of the cities by increased police power. As for censorship, x-rated videos have had more impact that the comix ever did. You can rent DEEP THROAT at a video chain store in nearly any major city in America today, but try to find a copy of ZAP 4 or BIZARRE SEX 4. Politics? We've got a hip president, huh? Religion? A bit there. You would be surprised to know how many underground comix had religious themes, pro and con, from Frank Stack's NEW ADVENTURES OF JESUS to AUTHENTIC VISIONARY. Lots of cartoonists drifted into Eastern religions. Greg Irons had a Buddhist funeral in Berkeley back in 1983.

The underground label is just that, a label, and it is no more definitive than any other. The majority of people who contributed to the medium in the wake of ZAP would not be considered underground today anymore than most of them were in 1970. They drew comic stories and strips and the place to publish was in the open market on the West Coast, not the closed market represented by Marvel, DC, Charlton, etc. If you checked with many of these artists, you would find that they routinely submitted stuff to Marvel and MAD first, then gave it to some underground company when it was rejected. This was one of the good and the bad things about the entire business, good because lots of people got published who would not have had a chance pre-ZAP, bad because much of the work was poorly done and earned underground comix as a genre a negative reputation in the field at large. For many in the business, underground is still synonymous with amateur. It is easier to understand this today by looking through a collection of the comix published in the seventies. A great many of them are terrible. A few stand out as superb contributions to the field of modern comic art.

One of the things that has harmed the majority of the people who contributed to underground comix over the years is the star system. It is because of this pattern, inherent in capitalism, that a lot of superb artists are likely to be ignored by history. Ask the average person standing around in the comic store and you find a rare one who doesn't know the names of Crumb and Shelton. On the other hand, it is the rare reader and collector who knows of people like Tim Boxell and Peter Pontiac and Brent Boates. Hundreds of artists who identified with and drew for underground titles were simply cast aside while the media elevated one or two to recognition level so they could be exploited as stars. Crumb, has recognized and tried to deal with the negative aspects of this pattern in FRITZ THE STAR and subsequent self interviews.

You might be inclined to say *So what?* but consider the economic effect of this star system on working cartoonists. On yourself, since you are probably trapped in this system. Hey, in the sixties, it was considered selling out to draw for an establishment paper like the EXAMINER; in 1990, Bill Griffith is boasting about his strip appearing there. Why not? He's made a living with his craft and hundreds of others envy him, I am sure. But what does this imply? Is the EXAMINER now underground or is Zippy simply an overground character? Would you want to argue that underground comix were an influence on *popular culture* because Zippy has made the transition from Alfred Jarry to the EXAMINER?

I'd like to hear from some of you on the subject of comix and culture and if I get some good letters that are not too long, I'll print some next issue. -Clay Geerdes

That's the entire point of Dada, and of most of the other postwar art movements. Distortion, irrationality, and the unlikely juxtapositon of objects.

Charles Williford.
THE BURNT ORANGE HERESY
1971.

An artist doesn't put himself in a defensive position. And that's what happens to a speaker. A critic's supposed to speak. He welcomes questions, because his job is to explain what the artist does. The artist is untrained for this sort of thing, and all he does is weaken his position. Some painters go around the country on lecture tours today, carrying racks of slides of their work, and they're an embarassed, inarticulate lot. The money's hard to turn down, I suppose, but in the end they defeat themselves and negate their work. A creative artist has no place on the lecture platform, and that goes for poets and novelists, as well as painters.

The nonfiction writer is entitled to lecture. He started an argument on purpose when he wrote his book, and he has every right to defend it. But the painter's work says what it has to say, and the critic interprets it for those who can't read it.

Charles Williford.
THE BURNT ORANGE HERESY
1971.

COMIX PLUGOLA

You can order a copy of the Underground Comix show program book, ZAP TO ZIPPY, from the Cartoon Art Museum. 665 Third Street, San Francisco, CA 94107. Send $7.35 for the first copy, $6.25 for each additional copy. This is a nice book with updated commentary dealing with the way various underground artists think of the artwork today.

THE MUNDANE ADVENTURES OF DISHMAN continue in #8. 75¢ pp from John McLeod, POB 671, Guelph, Ontario, Canada N1H GL3.

HEALTH 2 is $2 pp from David Tompkins, 207 Ave. B., Apt 2-A, NY, NY 10009.

FAN'TOONS 32 is $2 pp from Edd Vick, 5014-D Roosevelt Way NE, Seattle, WA 98105. Ed trades, prints LOCs, and publishes cartoons sent to him.

If you're looking for recent art by The Pizz and otherf newavers, check out YOUR FLESH #17. $3.50 from POB 2683, Loop Station, Mpls, MN 55402.

Dan Taylor's latest are SHORTOONZ 4 [50¢pp], and GALLERY 1 [50¢ pp]. 1833 Guntle Road, New Lebanon, OH 45345.

SNARF 14 should be on the shelf soon from Kitchen Sink.

EL VIBORA 118 is $8 pp from J. M. Berengueur, Plaza Beatas 3, Barcelon, Spain. Charles Burns cover. Big Baby story. Practice your Spanish. Get a copy.

CEREBUS reprints continue from Aardvark-Vanaheim, Box 1674, Station C, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada N2G 4R2.